

A LIFE *of* HARMONY

JANE BLAFFER OWEN

1915-2010

BY STEPHEN FOX

“Jane is magic.” That is how the architect Howard Barnstone once responded when asked about Jane Blaffer Owen, the Houston protector of New Harmony, Indiana, and patron of modern artists, architects, landscape architects, and theologians who died in Houston on June 21 of heart failure at the age of ninety-five.

Jane Owen was magic. Trained as a dancer, she moved in a rhythmic flow of energy. Her cultivated diction was as lilting in its intonations as her movements. “Dearest Cynthia” (or “Patty” or “Bob”) was how she customarily responded when someone’s name came up in conversation; her outpourings of sentiment were instinctive and infectious. Jane Owen was famous for her broad-brimmed hats and voluminous dresses, often in some marvelously ephemeral shade of gray or green. In New Harmony, where she spent much of the year, she was a sight to behold, careening about town in an electric golf cart (indeed making electric golf carts New Harmony’s alternative mode of public transit) while she extolled the quality of the honey produced by Laura and Ben Nicholson’s bees or the skills of the craftsmen building a house for her grandson Erik and his family. Jane Owen delighted in introducing outsiders to New Harmony. She was an extraordinarily generous host who personally escorted visitors on tours of the town’s historic sites, and then made sure everyone enjoyed a festive lunch in the garden of the Red Geranium, the restaurant she presided over.

Jane Owen’s charisma emanated from her spiritual liberality. She was profoundly affected by the teaching of the twentieth-century German-American theologian Paul Tillich, becoming by turns his admirer, student, and friend, and ultimately providing the place where he chose to be buried. Like her friends, Dominique and John de Menil, Jane Owen was inspired to combine modern forms of spiritual engagement with a commitment to peace and social justice as well as to modern forms of art, architecture, and landscape architecture. The French artist Jacques Lipchitz, whom she



ABOVE: Jane Owen in her famous broad-brimmed hat. OPPOSITE: Philip Johnson’s Roofless Church (1960).

“discovered” in 1950, so moved her with a maquette he had made for a sculpture called *Our Lady of Joy* that Jane Owen paid to have three bronze castings made of the piece, one of which went to the Church of Notre-Dame-de-Toute-Grace in France for which it had originally been commissioned, one to Iona Abbey in Scotland, and one to the Roofless Church in New Harmony, completed in 1960. Jane Owen commissioned Philip Johnson to design the Roofless Church in 1957. A walled enclosure faced with gilded bronze gates by Lipchitz and containing a billowing shingle-surfaced, open-air pavilion, beneath which *Our Lady of Joy* was installed, the Roofless Church was the first “art chapel,” a space for spiritual contemplation incorporating art but not dedicated to any one religious tradition. The Rothko Chapel, which Dominique and John de Menil built in Houston between 1964 and 1971 to contain the paintings of Mark Rothko, and initially designed by Philip Johnson, followed the Roofless Church as an art chapel.

Jane Owen was born in Houston in 1915, the eldest daughter of Sarah Campbell and Robert Lee Blaffer. Lee Blaffer was a co-founder of the Humble Oil & Refining Company, of which he was treasurer and, eventually, president and chairman of the board of directors. A trustee of the Kinkaid School and Rice University, Blaffer was revered by his daughter Jane. After Lee Blaffer’s death in 1942, Jane Owen’s mother, Sarah Blaffer, emerged as a serious collector of art. She began the Robert Lee Blaffer Collection at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, as a memorial to her husband. The year before her father died, Jane Owen married the petroleum geologist Kenneth Dale Owen. This is what brought her to New Harmony, a town of fewer than a thousand people near the southwest corner of Indiana where her husband had been born.

Kenneth Owen’s great-great-grandfather was Robert Owen, one of the most enlightened men of the nineteenth century. Robert Owen bought New Harmony in 1825 from its founder, Johann Georg Rapp, who had settled a colony of German religious enthusiasts there in 1814-15. Rapp’s community was a religious utopia. Owen and his associate, William Maclure, resettled the town with American and



European progressives in an effort to construct a secular, modern utopia. Although Owen's effort failed, four of his children chose to remain in New Harmony, one of them being Kenneth Owen's great-grandfather Richard Owen, a geologist and the first president of Purdue University. During the lifetime of Robert Owen's children, New Harmony was a center of stellar intellectual achievement. Richard Owen's brother, Robert Dale Owen, represented Indiana in the U.S. Congress in the 1840s and was instrumental in founding and building the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. But when Jane Owen encountered New Harmony in 1941 it was, ironically, in the throes of a brief oil exploration boom that tarnished and threatened what remained of its illustrious heritage: a substantial number of humble brick buildings that Georg Rapp's followers, the Harmonists, had built; the Granary, a fortress-like barn in which the Harmonists stored their harvests; two imposing Owen family houses of the 1840s and '50s; and a picturesque, albeit small, Main Street of Victorian storefronts. Jane Owen fell in love with New Harmony. She experienced her desire to rescue and preserve the town as a religious vocation.

In 1950, Jane Owen contacted Jacques Lipchitz, then working in New York, after reading about his work in *Art News* and seeing a photograph of the maquette of *Our Lady of Joy* in the French magazine *L'Art Sacré*, which was published by Dominique and John de Menil's mentor, Father Marie-Alain Couturier. Jane Owen moved beyond thinking about the renewal of New Harmony in antiquarian terms to conceive its "restoration" as a modern spiritual utopia, combining the religious and progressive projects of Georg Rapp and Robert Owen. It was through Lipchitz that she encountered Paul Tillich in the early 1950s. Frank Welch in his book, *Philip Johnson and Texas*, described Jane Owen's first meeting with Philip Johnson, when he came to Houston to present his design for the University of St. Thomas, and how Johnson impressed her with his passion for architecture. She realized she had found the right person to give shape to her vision of a setting in New Harmony for ecumenical exchange where *Our Lady of Joy* could be placed. Jane Owen and Philip Johnson worked for several years on the design of the Roofless

Church, especially the wood-framed baldachin that shelters Lipchitz's sculpture. The baldachin was one of Johnson's first built works to break with the modular rectilinearity that had characterized his architecture during the 1950s. Jane Owen renamed her cast of *Our Lady of Joy*, calling it *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, a spirit that was nurturing, maternal, and female. In 1963, she persuaded Tillich to come to New Harmony to dedicate a site across Main Street from the Roofless Church for a park to be named in his honor. On Johnson's recommendation, she had the New York landscape architects Zion & Breen design a natural setting of grassless berms planted thickly with spruce and hemlock trees, around which granite boulders inscribed with passages from Tillich's writings and a bronze bust by James Rosati were installed. This is where Tillich's ashes were interred in 1966. It is also where U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall came to designate New Harmony as a National Historic Landmark in 1965.

During the 1970s, Jane Owen's personal efforts to preserve New Harmony were institutionalized with the founding of Historic New Harmony, a nonprofit preservation organization. During the tenure of Historic New Harmony's first director, Ralph Schwartz, the town's second modern architectural landmark, the stunning, all-white Atheneum of 1979 by Richard Meier & Associates, was built. The Atheneum contains Historic New Harmony's visitors' center and history museum. Jane Owen contributed to this effort by building the New Harmony Inn of 1974 next to the Red Geranium Restaurant and adjoining Tillich Park. Designed by the Indianapolis architect Evans Woolen, the New Harmony Inn differs from the Roofless Church and the Atheneum in its self-effacing architecture, which blends in with the town rather than standing out.

The death of one of Jane and Kenneth Owen's three daughters, Carol Owen Coleman, in 1979 occasioned one of New Harmony's most moving spaces, Carol's Garden. Hidden behind an unassuming wood fence on North Street across from the

Roofless Church, Carol's Garden is lush yet serene. Jane Owen worked with the San Francisco landscape architect Lawrence Halprin on its design. Carol's Garden is an outdoor room shaped by the slender trunks and spreading canopies of trees planted in a circle around a central fountain. Ground cover carpets most of the garden's surface. Near one corner of the enclosure is a low bronze piece by the Houston sculptor Carroll Simms memorializing Carol Coleman. Emotional longing and spiritual resilience are palpable in Carol's Garden, where the melancholy of loss is weighed against faith in the regenerative power of nature.

Writing in *Landscape Architecture* magazine in 2004, Christine Gorby analyzed the gardens Jane Owen shaped in New Harmony as reflections of her sensibility. The intimacy of these spaces, the emphasis they place on contemplation, and their reliance on natural rather than constructed elements make them less assertive than New Harmony's celebrated works of modern architecture. Although she frequently encountered resistance to what locals considered her Texan ways, Jane Owen admired the groundedness, unpretentiousness, and democratic spirit of Indianans. In 1983 the journalist Barbara Grizzuti Harrison published a profile of Jane Owen in *Vanity Fair* that examined the contradictions between her quest for simplicity and spiritual fulfillment and the wealth and privilege in which she lived. Harrison wrote candidly about the tensions that marked Jane Owen's marriage to Kenneth Owen, the sorrow precipitated by Carol Coleman's death, and the ambivalence, at times resentment, with which New Harmony's largely non-affluent residents regarded Jane Owen's presence in their town. Harrison also dealt candidly with her own inability simply to dismiss Jane Owen, finding in her a genuine if not always explicable combination of *noblesse oblige*, compassion, and acute sensitivity to those experiencing emotional turmoil.

During the past three years, Jane Owen had encouraged an ambitious project undertaken at the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture of the University of Houston involving Ben Nicholson as visiting critic, professor and former Dean Joe Mashburn, and studio critics Andrew Vrana and Joe Meppelink and their students, who analyzed, designed, fabricated, and installed on the UH campus a version of a project for a meditation grotto that Frederick J. Kiesler designed for her between 1962 and 1965 for construction in Tillich Park.

Jane Owen lived what was not always a happy or charmed life, with determination and grace. Adversity taught her the virtue of peacefulness. She was vocal in her opposition to war and championed Barack Obama's presidential campaign because she hoped he would end the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. In New Harmony, she accomplished what neither the Harmonists nor her great-great-grandfather-in-law had been able to maintain: she caused the no-where of Utopia to coincide with the humble but ingratiating now-here of New Harmony.

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